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They Hold Me Back: The Dynamic Interplay of Parental Discouragement of Exploration, Parental Metaemotion and Adolescent's Sense of Agency

Filipa Nunes^{1,2}  | Catarina Pinheiro Mota^{2,3,4}  | Tiago Ferreira^{1,2}  | Ingrid Schoon⁵  | Paula Mena Matos^{1,2} 

¹Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Porto, Porto, Portugal, Portugal | ²Center for Psychology, University of Porto, Porto, Portugal | ³Escola de Ciências Humanas e Sociais – Polo I, University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro – UTAD, Vila Real, Portugal | ⁴RISE Health UTAD – Health Research Network, Porto, Portugal | ⁵Social Research Institute, University College London (UCL), London, UK

Correspondence: Paula Mena Matos (pmmatos@fpce.up.pt)

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Adolescence is a critical developmental period characterized by increasing needs for autonomy and identity exploration. However, limited research has examined how adolescents perceived parental discouragement of exploration over time.

Methods: This study examined the stability and change in adolescents' perceptions of parental discouragement of exploration, how these trajectories are shaped by parental metaemotion, and the bidirectional interplay between perceived discouragement and adolescents' sense of agency. A sample of 148 Portuguese adolescents ($M_{\text{age}} = 15.47$, $SD = 0.63$) and their parents participated across three assessment waves over 18 months. Adolescents (72.3% female, 27.7% male) reported on maternal and paternal discouragement of exploration and on their sense of agency, while parents provided baseline reports of metaemotion.

Results: Latent growth curve analyses revealed that adolescents' perceptions of both maternal and paternal discouragement increased over time, with significant variability between individuals. Higher parental metaemotion was associated with slower growth in perceived discouragement, highlighting its protective role in maintaining supportive parent–adolescent relationships. Adolescents with a stronger baseline agency perceived less parental discouragement, and increases in discouragement over time predicted lower agency at follow-up, indicating a reciprocal dynamic. These findings suggest that adolescents' interpretations of parental behaviors are shaped jointly by parents' emotional attunement and adolescents' own sense of personal agency.

Conclusion: The study offers novel insights into the dynamic and reciprocal processes through which family relationships and adolescent self-development co-evolve. The findings underscore the importance of family-focused interventions that consider the mutual influence between parent–child relationship processes and the development of adolescent agency.

Adolescence is widely recognized as a developmental stage marked by profound psychological, social, and relational transformations. One of the central developmental tasks during this period involves the progressive search for autonomy and identity exploration. Although adolescents increasingly turn to

peers, romantic partners, and other significant figures for support, parents remain a crucial source of emotional security (Allen et al. 2007; Zimmermann and Becker-Stoll 2002). Attachment theory highlights that sensitive, responsive and emotionally available parents provide a secure base that allows

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adolescents to explore their environments with confidence (Allen and Tan 2016; Bowlby 1988). When parents respond in supportive ways, they foster adolescents' ability to navigate developmental challenges, promoting greater self-confidence and trust in others. However, when parental behaviors are experienced as overprotective, intrusive, or discouraging of exploration, they may undermine this process, limiting adolescents' opportunities to test their competencies in the broader social world (Branje 2018).

Although some prior studies have examined parental behaviors that support or constrain exploration, most of this work remains cross-sectional, limiting our understanding of how adolescents' perceptions of discouragement evolve during late adolescence. Only a small number of studies have adopted longitudinal approaches, and these focus mostly on autonomy-supportive practices rather than discouragement or constraint (e.g., Branje et al. 2021; Loeb et al. 2021). Thus, little is known about how parental discouragement of exploration changes over time, or the conditions under which such discouragement may intensify or diminish.

Longitudinal studies suggest that parental encouragement of exploration is not static; rather, it varies over time in response to factors such as parental emotional competence, the adolescent's developmental stage, and broader contextual demands (Branje et al. 2021; Loeb et al. 2021). Importantly, preliminary evidence suggests that parental discouragement may be particularly consequential, showing consistent associations with adolescent maladjustment and limited sense of agency (Nunes et al. 2023; Branje 2018). This issue becomes even more salient in contemporary societies, where the pace of social, academic, and relational demands has intensified, making the negotiation between parental security provision and adolescent autonomy increasingly complex (Shah et al. 2022). Nevertheless, relatively little research has examined how adolescents themselves perceive parental encouragement—or discouragement—of exploration during late adolescence, a developmental phase in which these dynamics become particularly pronounced.

1 | Parental Metaemotion

A second dimension of the family context that warrants closer attention is parental metaemotion (PME). PME plays a critical role in adolescent development by involving parents' ability to recognize, understand, and validate their children's emotional experiences, thereby fostering a secure, emotionally supportive environment (Gottman et al. 1996; Greene et al. 2025; Katz et al. 2012). Importantly, PME also appears to be linked to adolescents' sense of agency, insofar as emotionally validating parenting supports the internalization of autonomy and the development of self-determination (Nunes et al. 2022a). Despite this evidence, much less is known about whether - and how - PME shapes parental behaviors related to the discouragement of exploration. Conceptually, parents who display high levels of metaemotional competence may be less likely to be perceived as discouraging, as their responses tend to be more aligned with adolescents' emotional needs and developmental strivings. Yet, this hypothesis remains largely untested, particularly during late adolescence, a period in which the negotiation of autonomy and relatedness becomes especially intense (Nunes et al. 2022a, b). Although PME has been widely studied, most

empirical work remains cross-sectional. Existing longitudinal studies tend to focus on emotion socialization and adolescents' internalizing or externalizing outcomes (e.g., Greene et al. 2025; Tammilehto et al. 2021), typically examining parental responses to children's emotions. However, they rarely address other domains of PME-related behavior, as parents discouraging exploration. As a result, the temporal role of PME in shaping the development of exploration-related parenting practices remains largely unknown.

2 | Adolescents' Sense of Agency

Alongside autonomy and exploration, developing a sense of personal agency constitutes another key developmental task of adolescence. Sense of agency refers to the individual's belief in their capacity to shape life outcomes and construct their own developmental trajectory (Nunes et al. 2022b; Deci and Ryan 2004; Schoon 2018). Previous empirical research has shown that agency is not a fixed individual trait but rather a dynamic process shaped by contextual factors, particularly family dynamics. For instance, studies have documented negative associations between parental discouragement of exploration and adolescents' sense of agency (Nunes et al. 2023). These findings suggest that adolescents who perceive their parents as limiting their autonomy may internalize these experiences, weakening their confidence in their own efficacy. Yet, developmental perspectives highlight that adolescents are not passive recipients of parental influence. Instead, they are active co-constructors of their environments, capable of shaping family interactions through their own behaviors, attitudes, and interpretations (Schoon and Heckhausen 2019; Soenens and Vansteenkiste 2005). This raises an important, but still under-explored, question: To what extent do parental practices shape adolescents' agency, and conversely, to what extent does adolescents' sense of agency shape their perceptions of parental encouragement or discouragement of exploration? Current evidence remains limited in addressing this bidirectionality, leaving a significant gap in our understanding of the dynamic interplay between parental behaviors and adolescent self-development. Despite increasing recognition of agency as a dynamic, context-dependent process, most studies examining its correlates rely on single-time-point measurements. Although some longitudinal studies have examined developmental changes in adolescents' sense of agency and modeled how parenting or contextual factors relate to agency trajectories (e.g., Nunes et al. 2023; Zimmerman et al. 2024), no existing research has examined the bidirectional interplay between adolescents' agency and parental discouragement of exploration over time. Thus, it remains unknown whether changes in parental discouragement predict shifts in adolescents' agency, whether adolescents' agency shapes how they perceive or respond to discouraging parental behaviors, or whether these processes mutually reinforce each other across development.

Taken together, current evidence across these domains remains fragmented. Because prior research has typically examined parental discouragement, parental metaemotion, and adolescents' agency in isolation—and often through cross-sectional methodologies—little is known about how these constructs jointly evolve across late adolescence. Although it is well established that parents can both enable and constrain

adolescents' autonomy development, we still lack a comprehensive understanding of how adolescents perceive parental discouragement of exploration over time, how such perceptions are shaped by parents' emotional competences, and how these perceptions intersect with the development of personal agency. By adopting a longitudinal approach, this study aims to capture the complexity and fluidity of these processes, offering insight into the reciprocal ways in which family relationships and adolescent development influence one another.

3 | The Current Study

This study has three objectives. First, it examines the stability and change in adolescents' perceptions of exploration discouragement by mothers and fathers during late adolescence. Second, it investigates how parental metaemotion contributes to adolescents' perceived trajectories of parental exploration discouragement. Third, it explores the dynamic interplay between adolescents' sense of agency and their perceptions of parental exploration discouragement over time. To capture the full range of developmental patterns, the study considers multiple possible trajectories of perceived discouragement—such as increases, stability, or decreases—rather than assuming uniformity across adolescents.

4 | Methods

4.1 | Participants

The sample included 148 Portuguese families composed of adolescents and their mothers and fathers. Adolescents (72.3% female, 27.7% male), aged 14 to 19 years, were assessed three times across 18-months, while parents participated only at the baseline. Adolescents' mean age were: $M = 15.47$, $SD = 0.63$ at baseline; $M = 16.45$, $SD = 0.68$ at T2; and $M = 16.88$, $SD = 0.84$ at T3. Most adolescents (91.2%) lived with both parents; Only a small proportion of the adolescents 6.1% lived only with their mother and 2.7% only with their father. Fathers' age ranged from 37 to 86 years ($M = 47.86$, $SD = 5.77$), and mothers' age ranged from 34 to 59 years ($M = 45.58$, $SD = 4.91$). Most fathers (93.2%) were employed, 5.4% were unemployed, and 1.4% were retired. Among mothers, 79.7% were employed, 18.2% unemployed, and 0.7% retired. Missing values were minimal (1.4%). Only adolescents whose mother and father completed the baseline assessment were included. Participant retention was complete, with no attrition observed across three waves.

4.2 | Measures

4.2.1 | Parental (Dis)Encouragement

Adolescents completed the Inhibition of Exploration and Individuality (IEI) subscale of the Father and Mother Attachment Questionnaire—Short Form (FMAQ; Nunes et al. 2020) at all three assessment points. The IEI subscale comprises five items assessing adolescents' perceptions that parents constrain individuality and discourage exploratory behaviors (e.g., "My parents discourage me when I want to try something new"). Responses were rated on a six-point Likert scale ranging from (1) "totally disagree" to (6) "totally agree". Internal consistency

across the three waves was acceptable for fathers (0.66/0.75/0.88) and mothers (0.70/0.72/0.78).

4.2.2 | Parental Metaemotion

Mothers and fathers independently completed, at the baseline, on the emotion-coaching subscale (5 items) of the Emotion-Related Parenting Styles—Short Form (ERPS; Paterson et al. 2012; Portuguese adaptation by Tavares et al. 2018). This subscale assesses parents' awareness and understanding of their own and their children's emotions, and their ability to use this awareness to support socialization (e.g., "It's important to help my child find out what caused his/her anger"). Items were rated on a five-point scale (1) "always false" to (5) "always true". Internal consistency was good: $\alpha = 0.88$ for fathers and $\alpha = 0.90$ for mothers.

4.2.3 | Sense of Agency

Sense of agency was operationalized using a multidimensional assessment model encompassing goal-setting, decision-making, optimism, and self-efficacy (Nunes et al. 2022a). Adolescents responded at baseline and T3. Adolescents completed the goal-setting (GS) and decision-making (DM) subscales of the Short Self-Regulation Questionnaire (SSRQ; Carey et al. 2004; Portuguese adaptation by García Del Castillo and Dias 2009). The GS subscale evaluates planning skills and the capacity to set specific goals (seven items; e.g., "When I have a goal, I usually plan how to achieve it"). The DM subscale assesses involvement in decision-making processes (five items; e.g., "When I decide to change something, I feel pressured by so many choices."). Both were rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from (1) "strongly disagree" to (5) "strongly agree". Adolescents also completed the optimism subscale of the Vision About Future (VAF; Ginevra et al. 2016; Portuguese adaptation by the Nunes et al. 2018), which assesses expectations of positive future outcomes (seven items; e.g., "Usually, I am full of enthusiasm and optimism about my future"). Responses range from (1) "does not describe me at all" to (5) "describes me very well". In addition, adolescents completed the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE; Schwarzer and Jerusalem 1995; Portuguese adaptation by Nunes et al. 1999), which measures perceived self-efficacy, which measures beliefs about one's ability to cope with challenges (10 items; e.g., "I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort"). Original response options (from 1 to 4) were rescaled to a five-point scale (1–5), ensuring comparability across agency indicators. The composite agency model showed good reliability ($\alpha = 0.70$ at baseline; $\alpha = 0.73$ at T3).

4.3 | Procedures

Data were collected as part of a broader project examining individual, relational, family, and school-related predictors of adolescents' sense of agency. The study received approval from the Ethical Committee of the authors' institutions, as well as authorization from the University's data protection officer and the Portuguese Ministry of Education. All public schools in the Porto district ($N = 71$) were contacted by phone and email. Eight schools agree to participate. The study included three assessment waves. The research team introduced the project to

students; written informed consent was obtained from parents, and assent from adolescents.

Although the original plan involved three assessments at 6-month intervals, COVID-19-related school closures required adjustments: T2 occurred 12 months after baseline, and T3 occurred 6 months after T2. Both T2 and T3 assessments were administered in classrooms during school hours, with the research team providing online support.

At each wave, adolescents completed IEI subscale and, at baseline and T3, the sense of agency measure. Parents independently completed the metaemotion questionnaire at baseline. No incentives were offered for participation.

The study was not pre-registered. Due to confidentiality requirements, the and materials cannot be publicly but are available upon request from the corresponding author.

4.4 | Data Analysis

Univariate and multivariate outliers were inspected using Z-scores and Mahalanobis distance, and no outliers were detected. Normality was examined through skewness and kurtosis, and participants' data showed no severe departures from normality (Kline 2015). Next, missing data were inspected, and descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and correlations) were computed. We examined the psychometric properties of the measures through reliability analyses, confirmatory factorial analysis (CFA), and measurement invariance (MI). We used the following cutoffs to interpret the CFA results: CFI and TLI ≥ 0.80 , RMSEA and SRMR < 0.10 , indicating acceptable fit (Kline 2015). Regarding MI, we tested longitudinal invariance for the inhibition of exploration and individuality (IEI) subscale and for the sense of measure, as well as invariance across parents' roles for the IEI. We also computed intraclass class correlation (ICCs). The ICC results revealed that only a small proportion of the variance in IEI (father version) was attributable to class level (ICC = 0.11/.08/.06) or school level

(ICC = 0.01/.00/.02) at baseline, T2, and T3. A similar pattern was found for the IEI mother version (class = 0.09/.18/.11; school = 0.03/.00/.06). To account for potential non-independence of observations, standard errors were corrected using a design-based estimation approach (Muthen and Satorra 1995).

Next, we tested an unconditional latent growth curve (LGC) model to examine the stability and change in perceived exploration discouragement by mother and father among adolescents in late adolescence. We then estimated conditional LGC models to test the contribution of parental metaemotion to these trajectories over time. Further, we examined whether father and mother discouragement trajectories predicted adolescents' sense of agency at T3, while controlling for baseline levels of sense of agency. A robust maximum likelihood estimation was used to correct for non-normality and non-independence of the data. All analyses were conducted in R (R Core Team 2020), using the lavaan package (Rosseel 2012) and the semTools package (Jorgensen 2019).

5 | Results

5.1 | Preliminary Analyses: Confirmatory Factor Analyses and Measurement Invariance

The Inhibition of Exploration and Individuality (IEI) subscale demonstrated a good fit for fathers' and mothers' versions at the baseline, T2, and T3. The composite sense of agency model also showed good fit at baseline and T3. The parental metaemotion questionnaire revealed acceptable fit at the baseline (Table 1). The father version of IEI revealed longitudinal partial scalar invariance ($\Delta\chi^2_{(4)} = 8.93$, $p = 0.063$); whereas the mother version revealed longitudinal residual invariance ($\Delta\chi^2_{(3)} = 2.67$, $p = 0.445$). Further, partial scalar invariance across parents' roles was supported across three assessment points ($\Delta\chi^2_{(20)} = 24.30$, $p = 0.230$). Additionally, a sense of personal agency revealed longitudinal scalar invariance between baseline and T3 ($\Delta\chi^2_{(4)} = 3.74$, $p = 0.442$).

TABLE 1 | Confirmatory factor analyses.

Measure	T1	T2	T3
ED FATHER	$\chi^2_{(7)} = 7.89$, $p = 0.342$, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.03, SRMR = 0.03	$\chi^2_{(8)} = 14.31$, $p = 0.074$, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.02	$\chi^2_{(7)} = 1095$, $p = 141$, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.02
ED MOTHER	$\chi^2_{(8)} = 10.74$, $p = 0.217$, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.05, SRMR = 0.02	$\chi^2_{(7)} = 1.91$, $p = 0.167$, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.08, SRMR = 0.02	$\chi^2_{(8)} = 8.65$, $p = 0.373$, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.02, SRMR = 0.02
SPA	$\chi^2_{(2)} = 0.03$, $p = 0.984$, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.01, SRMR = 0.01	NA	$\chi^2_{(7)} = 10.95$, $p = 0.141$, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.02
EC FATHER	$\chi^2_{(4)} = 5.52$, $p = 0.238$, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.05, SRMR = 0.02	NA	NA
EC MOTHER	$\chi^2_{(5)} = 2.84$, $p = 0.724$, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.05, SRMR = 0.02	NA	NA

Abbreviations: ED FATHER, Exploration discouragement by father; ED MOTHER, Inhibition of exploration and individuality to mother; ME FATHER, Father metaemotion; ME MOTHER, Mother metaemotion; NA, Not applicable; SPA, Sense of Personal Agency.

5.2 | Covariances

The correlational analyses showed moderate positive associations between exploration discouragement scores for fathers and mothers (r ranging from 0.20 to 0.55). In contrast, both father and mother exploration discouragement were negatively associated with adolescents' sense of personal agency. Correlations with father and mother metaemotion dimensions were generally weak and non-significant (see Table S1).

5.3 | Latent Growth Curve (LGC): Unconditional and Conditional Models

An unconditional LGC model was estimated to examine the trajectories of adolescents' perception regarding of father and mother discouragement of their exploration efforts across time. Using manifest variables, father and mother discouragement were independently modeled at baseline, T2, and T3. The intercept loadings were fixed to 1, and the slope loadings were fixed to 0, 1, and 1.5 to account for the time intervals between assessments. The model (see Figure 1) estimated a latent intercept and slope for both mother and father exploration discouragement.

The results revealed an adequate fit to the data ($\chi^2_{(6)} = 2.78$, $p = 0.836$, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.01, SRMR = 0.02). Adolescents reported a mean baseline score of 1.89 ($p = 0.001$) for father exploration discouragement, followed by a positive linear slope ($b = 0.142$, $p = 0.005$). Significant between-subject variance for both the intercept ($b = 0.521$, $p = 0.001$) and the slope

($b = 0.287$, $p = 0.001$). For mother exploration discouragement, adolescents reported a mean baseline score of 1.87 ($p = 0.001$), followed by a positive linear slope ($b = 0.096$, $p = 0.040$). Significant between-subject variance was found for the intercept ($b = 0.600$, $p = 0.001$) and the slope ($b = 0.235$, $p = 0.001$).

Four manifest variables measuring sense of personal agency at baseline and at T3, as well as father and mother metaemotion at baseline, were added to the previous LGC model. We modeled the links between baseline sense of agency and baseline father and mother metaemotion with the intercept and slope of father and mother exploration discouragement. We then added paths from the intercept and slope of father and mother exploration discouragement to adolescents' sense of agency at T3, controlling for baseline agency. This conditional model revealed an adequate fit to the data ($\chi^2_{(32)} = 39.00$, $p = 0.184$, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.04, SRMR = 0.07). Baseline sense of personal agency was negatively associated with initial values of father ($\beta = -0.36$, $p = 0.001$) and mother ($\beta = -0.34$, $p = 0.001$) exploration discouragement, and positively associated with sense of personal agency at T3 ($\beta = 0.60$, $p = 0.001$). Father metaemotion was negatively linked to the growth rate of adolescents' perception of father exploration discouragement ($\beta = -0.15$, $p = 0.010$), and a similar pattern emerged for mother: mother metaemotion was negatively associated with growth rate of perceived mother exploration discouragement ($\beta = -0.16$, $p = 0.010$). Finally, the growth rate of adolescents' perception of father ($\beta = -0.30$, $p = 0.001$) and mother ($\beta = -0.26$, $p = 0.001$) exploration discouragement was negatively linked with adolescents' sense of agency at T3 (see Figure 2).

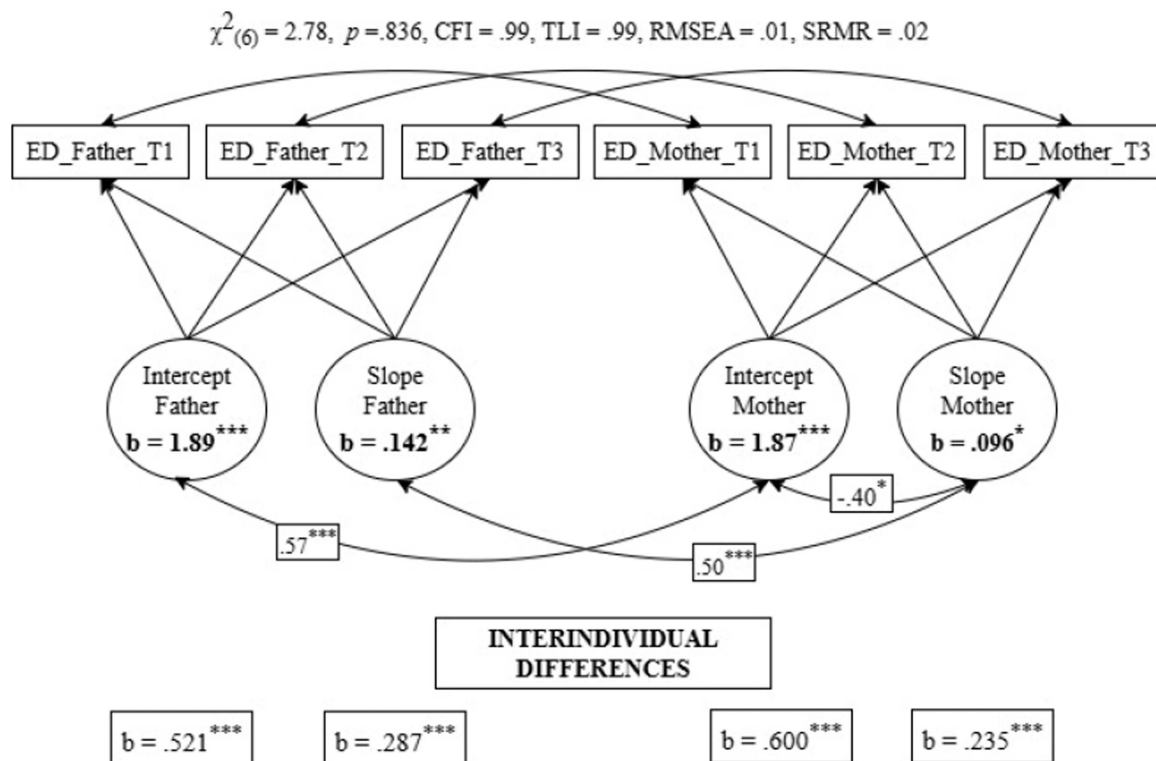


FIGURE 1 | Unconditional Latent Growth Curve (LGC) on adolescents' perceptions of father and mother exploration discouragement across Late Adolescence. Note: ED_Father_T1 – Exploration discouragement by Father at baseline; ED_Mother_T1 – Exploration discouragement by Mother at baseline; ED_Father_T2 – Exploration discouragement by Father at T2; ED_Mother_T2 – Exploration discouragement by Mother at T2; ED_Father_T3 – Exploration discouragement by Father at T3; ED_Mother_T3 – Exploration discouragement by Mother at T3.

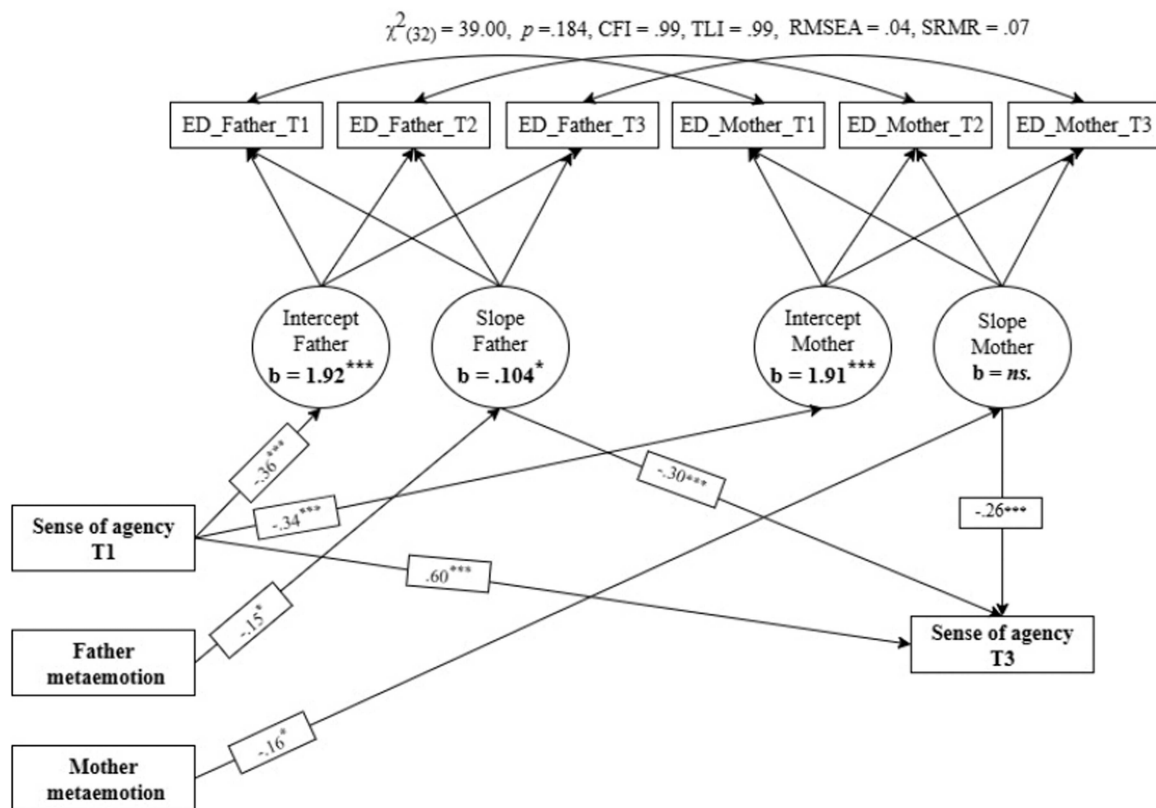


FIGURE 2 | Conditional LGC on father and mother exploration discouragement: Effects of sense of agency and parental metaemotion. *Note:* ED_Father_T1 – Exploration discouragement by Father at baseline; ED_Mother_T1 – Exploration discouragement by Mother at baseline; ED_Father_T2 – Exploration discouragement by Father at T2; ED_Mother_T2 – Exploration discouragement by Mother at T2; ED_Father_T3 – Exploration discouragement by Father at T3; ED_Mother_T3 – Exploration discouragement by Mother at T3.

6 | Discussion

This study examines adolescents' perceptions of parental exploration discouragement across late adolescence. The first main result shows that adolescents reported an increase, over time, in perceived discouragement from both mothers and fathers. This pattern is consistent with attachment network reorganization that occurs during adolescence (Allen and Tan 2016; McElhaney et al. 2009; Zimmermann and Becker-Stoll 2002). During late adolescence, young people progressively seek greater emotional closeness and support from peers, romantic partners, or other significant adults, rather than exclusively from parents (McElhaney et al. 2009). This developmental shift reflects a growing need for autonomy, individualization, and differentiation, but it can also introduce tensions in parent–adolescent relationships (Branje 2018). As adolescents strive for greater independence and emotional autonomy, parents—particularly those who are more controlling or anxious—may perceive this shift as a threat to relational closeness and attempt to reassert their role through more controlling or protective strategies, which adolescents may interpret as discouragement of exploration (Brumbaugh and Fraley 2006; McElhaney et al. 2009; Umemura et al. 2020).

An increase in perceived parental discouragement can result from actual changes in parental behavior, as well as from shifts in adolescents' interpretations of their relationships with parents and their adaptation to new developmental demands. In other words, these findings point to potential misalignment between adolescents' increasing need for autonomy and the

parental responses they encounter. Such misalignment may undermine the regulatory and supportive role traditionally associated with parenting during adolescence. While this study offers initial insights, further research is needed to deepen our understanding of these dynamics.

A second major finding concerns the role of parental metaemotion. The results indicate that higher levels of metaemotion in both mothers and fathers are associated with slower increases in adolescents' perceptions of discouragement. Parents who demonstrate greater emotional understanding, respect, and validation of their children's emotions appear to buffer adolescents against perceiving parental involvement as restrictive. These findings align with prior research showing that parental emotional validation contributes to more secure parent–child relationships and supports adolescents' engagement in exploratory behaviors (Gottman et al. 1996; Nunes et al. 2022a). In the context of the attachment reorganization described above, emotionally attuned parents may continue to be perceived as a secure base—even as adolescents turn to others for support (Brumbaugh and Fraley 2006; Umemura et al. 2020). This secure base function may help adolescents experience parental involvement as less sustaining a relational controlling, reducing the likelihood that adolescents interpret parental behavior as an obstacle to their exploration.

A third major finding of his study highlights adolescents' sense of agency (SA). Adolescents with a stronger sense of agency at baseline tended to perceive their parents as less discouraging from the outset. This result suggests that personal agency

shapes to how adolescents interpret parental practices. Adolescents with a stronger sense of agency may hold a more secure and autonomous view of their relationships with parents and may therefore be less likely to perceive parental interactions as discouragement. This finding is consistent with a developmental perspective that views adolescents as active co-constructors of their relational environments. Rather than being passive recipients of structural influences (e.g., the family context), adolescents' own attitudes and internal resources shape the meanings they attribute to parental behaviors (Schoon 2018). Limited empirical evidence has already suggested that adolescents with stronger agency are more likely to interpret parental structure as autonomy supportive rather than controlling (Soenens and Vansteenkiste 2005), and the present findings reinforce this interpretation.

Finally, the study shows that increases in adolescents' perceptions of parental discouragement predict lower levels of agency at follow-up. When adolescents repeatedly interpret parental behaviors as discouraging, they may internalize messages that weaken confidence, autonomous self, and self-efficacy. These experiences can hinder the development of an autonomous self, making it more challenging to develop a strong sense of agency (Schoon 2018). This result extends previous findings that had already identified negative correlations between perceptions of parental discouragement and levels of personal agency in adolescents. Nunes et al. (2023), for example, found that maternal discouragement was negatively associated with developing of agency during adolescence. The present study adds to this body of evidence by demonstrating the negative effect of parental discouragement on the development of a sense of agency over time.

6.1 | Limitations and Future Research

Despite the contributions of the current study, some limitations should be acknowledged. First, the findings rely exclusively on self-report data, which may be subject to biases such as social desirability or limited self-awareness. Second, the relatively small sample size constrains the generalizability of the results and highlights the need for replication with larger and more diverse samples. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating multiple methods of data collection, including interviews, which may provide a richer and more nuanced understanding of adolescents' experiences and family dynamics. Another important direction involves examining alternative family configurations—such as single-parent households or stepfamilies—to better reflect the diversity of contemporary family life. Finally, future work should explore potential differences between male and female adolescents, as gendered expectations and socialization processes may shape both parental behaviors and adolescents' perceptions of exploration discouragement in distinct ways.

6.2 | Practical Implications

The findings of the current study carry several practical implications for interventions aimed at supporting adolescent development and parent–adolescent relationships. First, they underscore the importance of promoting parental awareness of

how their behaviors and emotional responses are interpreted by adolescents, particularly during a developmental period marked by a heightened need for autonomy. Psychoeducational programs and parenting interventions could help parents differentiate between protective or controlling practices and supportive behaviors that encourage exploration. Second, the results highlight the protective role of parental metaemotion, suggesting that interventions designed to foster parents' emotional competence—such as recognizing, validating, and constructively responding to their adolescent children's emotions—may serve as effective strategies to buffer adolescents against perceptions of discouragement. Such approaches could help maintain a sense of relational security while simultaneously promoting autonomy. Third, the study underscores the significance of adolescents' sense of agency in shaping how they perceive and respond to parental behaviors.

Taken together, these findings underscore the need for family-focused interventions that recognize the reciprocal influence between parent–child relationships and adolescent self-development. There is value in programs aimed at strengthening adolescents' self-determination, decision-making, and active involvement in co-constructing their relational environment—ideally in conjunction with interventions that help parents adopt emotionally attuned practices and empower adolescents to cultivate a stronger sense of agency. Family-focused interventions may contribute to healthier developmental trajectories and more balanced parent–adolescent relationships.

Author Contributions

Filipa Nunes: conceptualization, funding acquisition, writing – original draft, methodology, formal analysis, data curation, investigation. **Catarina Pinheiro Mota:** conceptualization, funding acquisition, writing – review and editing, supervision, project administration. **Tiago Ferreira:** formal analysis, data curation, writing – review and editing. **Ingrid Schoon:** writing – review and editing, supervision. **Paula Mena Matos:** conceptualization, funding acquisition, writing – review and editing, formal analysis, project administration, supervision.

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Ethics Statement

Authorizations were obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Education Science at the University of Porto (REF^a2017/12-11).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Permission to Reproduce Material From Other Sources

The authors do not reproduce material from other sources. They have obtained the necessary approvals to use the self-report measures used in the current study.

Data Availability Statement

This research was not pre-registered. The data used in the research cannot be publicly shared but are available upon request. All materials used in the research cannot be publicly shared but are available upon request to corresponding author.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Table S1: Covariances over time.